



‘Inaccurate but Truthful’: Q&A with Screenwriter Peter Morgan

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ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

In the spring of 2014, the University of Vienna in cooperation with the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for the History and Theory of Biography in Vienna organised an interdisciplinary lecture series “The Many Faces of Biography”. This lecture series brought together scholars and practitioners of various historical and recent biographical forms, focusing on the specificities and challenges posed by different biographical media. One of them was Peter Morgan, a major name in contemporary biographical film-making (and playwriting), noted for his characteristic dual-structure approach to writing lives for the screen. During one of the sessions of the lecture series he was interviewed by Julia Novak and Werner Huber about some of his most famous work, such as *The Deal* (2003), *The Queen* (2006), *Frost/Nixon* (2008), *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008), and *Rush* (2013). In this Q&A he shed light on the principles guiding the screenwriter-biographer’s work, his conflicting responsibilities towards biographee and audience, and the biopic’s potential to impact on the fame and after-fame of historical and contemporary celebrities.

ABSTRACT IN GERMAN

Im Sommersemester 2014 organisierte die Universität Wien in Kooperation mit dem Ludwig Boltzmann Institut für Geschichte und Theorie der Biographie in Wien eine interdisziplinäre Ringvorlesung mit dem Titel „The Many Faces of Biography“. Diese Vortragsreihe präsentierte WissenschafterInnen und AutorInnen, die sich mit unterschiedlichen biographischen Formen und

historischen Epochen befassen, wobei der Schwerpunkt auf den Besonderheiten und Herausforderungen der verschiedenen biographischen Medien lag. Im Rahmen der Ringvorlesung war auch der weltweit erfolgreiche Drehbuchautor und Dramatiker Peter Morgan zu Gast, dessen Filmbiographien für ihre charakteristische ‚doppelte Lebensbeschreibung‘ bekannt sind. Julia Novak und Werner Huber befragten ihn zu einigen seiner berühmtesten Filme, wie zum Beispiel *The Deal* (2003), *The Queen* (2006), *Frost/Nixon* (2008), *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008) und *Rush* (2013). In diesem Interview legte er grundlegende Prinzipien des Biopic-Schreibens dar, gewährte Einblick in sein zwiespältiges Verhältnis zu Filmpublikum einerseits und biographischem Subjekt andererseits und in die Macht des Biopic, auf die Reputation lebender und historischer Persönlichkeiten einzuwirken.

Keywords: Peter Morgan, biopic, filmic biography, celebrity, Rush, The Deal, The Queen, Frost/Nixon

On 22 May 2014, award-winning screenwriter and playwright Peter Morgan visited the University of Vienna to speak on the relationship between biography and screenwriting in a Q&A as part of a lecture series on “The Many Faces of Biography”. This interdisciplinary lecture series was organised in cooperation with the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for the History and Theory of Biography in Vienna and brought together scholars from different fields working on various historical epochs and auto/biographical practices. While there were recurring themes that concerned biography in general – such as the notion of biographical truth, the ethics of subject representation, the question whose lives get told and for what reason, the self-consciousness of the biographer – the emphasis was placed on the specificities and challenges posed by different biographical media. Hence the programme featured, next to the traditional book-length treatment of a life (Claire Tomalin), critical investigations of alternative and innovative forms of life-writing, such as virtual biography (Vanessa Hanneschläger, Tobias Heinrich, Katharina Prager), meta-biography (Caitríona Ní Dhúill, Ed Saunders), letters (Clare Brant), celebrity portraits (Sandra Mayer), fictional biographies (Julia Novak), bio plays (Birgit Däwes), and biopics.¹

“The biographical motion picture, or *biopic*, is a troublesome genre”, Belén Vidal declares in his introduction to a recent essay collection on *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, describing it as a medium that is habitually “[c]avalier in its handling of historical facts”.² As much as the biopic has garnered suspicion from academic critics, its successes at the box office as well as at film award ceremonies have secured it a central place among contemporary forms of biographical discourse – it has become one of the foremost media through which we encounter biographical subjects today.

Screenwriter and playwright Peter Morgan has been noted for his decisive role in the development of the contemporary biopic. After his early work for television in the 1990s, his career really took off with *The Deal* (2003), about the friendship and rivalry between Gordon Brown and Tony Blair, which won him a BAFTA award and several nominations for Directors Guild of Great Britain and International Emmy Awards. Since then, he has written a series of biopics that garnered Golden Globe and Academy Awards and nominations and has been hailed as “the leading scriptwriter of our age”.³ His internationally successful films – such as *Frost/Nixon* (2008), *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008), his ‘Blair cycle’ of *The Deal* (2003), *The Queen* (2006), *The Special Relationship* (2010), and, most recently, *Rush* (2013)⁴ – have been noted for their unique approach to biographical representation: they are marked by a departure from the traditional “‘monolithic’ single life” towards a dual structure⁵ that also eschews the ‘cradle-to-grave’ approach, “zoom[ing] in”, instead, on a central moment of conflict in the historical protagonists’ lives.⁶ Thus, *Frost/Nixon*, with Michael Sheen and Frank Langella in the title roles, stages the legendary interviews conducted by British journalist David Frost with ex-president Richard Nixon in 1977. *The Queen*, starring Helen Mirren as Queen Elizabeth II and Michael Sheen once again as Tony Blair, dramatises the crisis of the British monarchy and the beginnings of the queen’s relations with her new prime minister in the aftermath of Princess Diana’s death, earning Morgan a Golden Globe Award. *Rush* zooms in on the rivalry between Formula One drivers James Hunt (Chris Hemsworth) and Niki Lauda (Daniel Brühl) during the dramatic racing season of 1976.

Morgan’s answers in the Q&A shed light on the principles guiding the screenwriter-biographer’s work, his conflicting responsibilities towards biographee and audience, and the biopic’s potential to impact on the fame and after-fame of historical and contemporary celebrities.⁷

JLN (Julia Novak): How did you get drawn to the biopic genre, and what makes a good biopic, in your experience?

PM: I never thought I would get involved in biographical film-making at all. The first film I did like this was *The Deal*, about Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. The reason why that was sort of shocking was because there was a tradition in the British media to treat politicians through satire. A politician would only be worthy of comment by other people in the media satirically, comedically, like a cartoon – I don’t know if you are familiar with *Spitting Image*. *The Deal* was probably the most important film for me, only because it started everything off. There was a rumour in a small circle in

Westminster that the relationship between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown had deep tentacles and that they were like Cain and Abel, that they were brothers. These were two guys that had become Members of Parliament in 1983, and they were the beginning of the end of socialism. So, when the Labour Government of 1983 was wiped out by Margaret Thatcher and these guys identified that the trade union, nuclear disarmament CND Labour Party under Michael Foot had no future, they began to modernize the party, and they did things that nobody else had ever done: they wore dark suits. They were handsome. If you were a labour politician you wore trade union badges, you wore brown shoes, you drank warm beer. You spoke in either a Scottish or a northern accent. You definitely were not metropolitan, you were not from the south, you were not fit or healthy, you did not eat vegetables. And these guys totally revolutionised British politics. Of the two of them, Tony Blair was the junior partner, and Gordon Brown was the senior partner and an esteemed, respected figure in the Labour movement. It was always assumed that Gordon Brown would be the Prime Minister and Tony Blair would be his deputy. And that was the assumption which underpinned their relationship. This is all fact. But it's not fact in a sort of "what happened on which day" way, it's an emotional fact. The great tragedy of Gordon Brown – rather like Richard Nixon – is that he is unpresentable, he doesn't connect with people. People liked Tony Blair. They didn't like Gordon Brown. Gordon Brown carries with him a weight, a pathology, a complexity that people find difficult. He doesn't look them in the eye, he has no lightness. Tony Blair is blessed like the devil with charm. He's like a film star, he walks into a room and no matter what your feelings were before he walked into the room they evaporate the minute you set eyes on him. And he is a political vote-winning machine. *The Deal* is about the moment when Gordon Brown begins to realise that nobody loves him. It's a very emotional story about the older brother being replaced by the younger brother. And when we made it, we made it as though we were filming something which had nothing to do with Gordon Brown and Tony Blair. We were doing a story which had an underpinning emotional truth. But we set it as forensically and as accurately as we could within the world in which these two particular individuals operated, which was the politics of the 80s and 90s in Britain. The film was saturated with archive footage, newsreel footage, and that is telling people who are watching it: this has to be for real – there is now archive footage. And yet, the scenes were scenes of conjecture. But I believe that the scenes were so truthful and spoke to such a deep truth that existed that people weren't aware of that they completely changed the way everybody went on to write. And then what happened was this snowball effect that journalists picked up on this underlying truth. And from that moment on, the way in which

we read or consumed stories about Tony Blair and Gordon Brown in the media had been defined by a chain reaction of people taking the baton from an underlying truth that came to me because at the time I happened to be quite close with a few people that were working as insiders in Downing Street. And it was ground-breaking. [...] What I think it started – and what we have seen a lot of, certainly in the British media but also outside – is the idea of writing a biopic about unlikely people in unlikely situations through a particularly reduced aperture. You don't start with their birth – I didn't go, "one day Gordon Brown was born in ... Meanwhile, Tony Blair was born ... As children, they were both ..." We started mid-problem. So with that film all of us felt we had done something different. And I think to me the biggest question about biography is the relationship between truth and accuracy.

When I came to writing *The Queen*, it was with the same people that had made *The Deal*. I have no idea what is said between the Queen and her Prime Ministers. The whole point about the relationship that the Queen and the Prime Minister have in these weekly meetings is that they are confidential. The Queen doesn't tell her husband; the Prime Ministers have never spoken about it to their wives, these are unminuted. It is the only area in their professional lives that is unminuted. Everything else the Prime Minister says is recorded. And so I thought well that feels like fun, I want to write that. Because no one can tell me I got it wrong. But at the same time, what I discovered is that an audience, even though you have no idea what happens in this room – an audience, any audience, will tell you if you got it wrong. It's amazing. If you cheat, they will tell you. I've never cheated and not got busted. People smell it. But people believed that what we did with *The Queen* was sincere. It rang true. Now, we worked really, really hard to work out what happened [after Princess Diana's death]. But we don't know what happened. Have any of you seen the film? In the film, there is the man who comes in with the basket, and all of this "Er, Ma'am, er ...". The man has always got bad news to bring. I don't know if you know, but the royal family, in the days after Diana's death, took away the television and the newspapers so that the boys would not be exposed to what was going on in London. So this revolution was happening in London, and people who worked for the royal family knew, because they had their televisions on, but the royal family had no idea what was going on. They were just in this castle, in East Scotland, in the mist. And, this man would come in every time and go: "Um, Ma'am ..." And he wouldn't know quite how to tell them the latest catastrophe. And this man, I've now sort of really met him, he said – and I think it's a really interesting quote about biography: "You got everything wrong, but you got everything right." So, every single person

that was there that week watches that film and goes, “how the ah! did they find out about it.” But at the same time, it wasn’t quite right. So, there were details wrong, and what I think what he means by that, is, it was inaccurate. But it was deeply and profoundly truthful. And for that reason we connected with it.

I’m always wrestling, every single day when I am writing a biographical film, I wrestle with the relationship between truth and accuracy. And I have two ways of making myself sleep at night. The first is, if it’s truthful, I feel okay. And the second is I tell myself that what I’m doing ultimately is painting a portrait. When you are in the business of creative writing, there is an unspoken covenant between you and the audience, where the audience is expecting you to bring something to it that is beyond conventional, documentarian, accuracy-based treatments. They’re coming to a painter, rather than a photographer. That is not to say that photography is a lesser art, not at all, it’s just a different art. And in the same way biographical film-making is different from documentary film-making. Its responsibilities are different. Again though, there are these problems I have. For *The Queen* I feel pretty confident. *The Queen* is *exactly* how it was. In other words, I think it’s an underlying truth that Tony Blair, in 1997, was the Messiah. I wrote this at the height of the Iraq war. I was writing *The Queen* in 2003, and at the precise moment that he was ignoring what Hans Blix was not finding and ignoring the fact that there was no UN resolution to support aggressive action in Iraq. So while I was writing him being a star, he was busy being a warmonger. And I had to resist writing *The Queen* from a point of view of the knowledge that I had later. In 1997 he was a rock star, in 1997 he was the great white hope. He was young and seemed to be sleeping only with his wife, and, you know, all sorts of revolutionary things for a politician.

JLN: So, how ‘truthful’ was the treatment you gave Anne Boleyn?

PM: That was very different, because I consider *The Other Boleyn Girl* to be a historical soap opera. I do not consider that to be in any way, remotely, biographical material. Again the contract with the audience is the important thing. What are you telling the audience? Are you saying to the audience, come with me, trust me, this is how it was. You’re not. With *The Other Boleyn Girl* you’re saying, have you got your popcorn, are you enjoying yourself, Eric Bana. I think that’s as clear a signal as you can give to anybody that the film is not serious. But it’s an interesting point, *The Other Boleyn Girl* is a story about the Boleyns, and it takes the change, the great revolution that happened in England, as it went from a fundamentally

Catholic to a Protestant country, the religiousness of people, and the whole evolution in Henry VIII's time, and it sees it through the prism of one family. One of the many rumours that circulated was that she had had adulterous, incestuous relationships with her own brother. And, I mean, the feeling is that George Boleyn was gay. These are the myths that have grown up around that family and around this particular story. I guess what I want to say is, I can't back it up. And in this particular case we pulled out of suggesting that they actually had sex together. Why? Not out of any historical proof, but because the studio paying for the movie said: "We're not going *there!* Oh my *Gawd!*" I remember the meeting: "Shall I write it with George having sex with Anne, then?" "Are you *crazy?!?*" "OK, so, we won't then. They don't then."

WH (Werner Huber): To come back to the idea of the audience. Is your play *The Audience* also starring Helen Mirren a spin-off then from *The Queen*? Because it seems that the idea was just too neat, to have the Queen there and her Prime Ministers through the ages?

PM: Yeah, well, it's a good question, because they are slightly tonally different. *The Audience*, which is a play that we're going to do in Vienna next year, in German ... I thought, how exciting, the idea that this woman through sixty years had twelve Prime Ministers. And in the time, you know, these Prime Ministers come and go. They go through this revolving door, and she is just constant. And they all have these relationships with her; once a week they go and have these meetings with her which last anywhere between twenty and ninety minutes. And I thought, what a wonderful way of exploring the history of the second half of the twentieth century through this particular conversation, where she starts off being the granddaughter of Winston Churchill and she ends up being the grandmother of David Cameron. And obviously, because I only dramatise one or two audiences, you can't be forensic. But you go to an underlying truth of each premiership, or of each moment. You try not to be reductive. You try not to take the one event that we all know happened [...]. You try to take something, one conversation that plays naturally and yet, somehow, gets to an underlying truth of what the story of that premiership was. So, that's what *The Audience* is. And *The Audience* has set off a spin-off, another spin-off as it were, which is this television show that I am now writing, which is going to be endless. The first ten episodes, the first ten hours, only take us as far as 1956. And I'm writing again about those two houses, Downing Street and Buckingham Palace, and the intertwining relationships between the two big houses that effectively tell the story of World War II.

WH: Would it be true to say that doubles, antagonist vs. protagonist, is one of your favourite themes or leitmotifs? If you think of Tony Blair and the Queen or Niki Lauda and James Hunt?

PM: Well, you know, conflict is always good, and I don't know why, but I started writing these stories where there are two people just beating the crap out of each other, and then pretty much a long scene at the end in which they kind of make up.

There is one thing I am uncomfortable about, and I have had sleepless nights out of this one: in *Frost/Nixon*, at the end when Richard Nixon is defeated by Frost, that to me is where I want to put myself in jail. Because I don't know if that is an honest portrayal of what has really happened. There is no question that David Frost reduced Richard Nixon to repentance, but within thirty seconds he was back on his feet, talking again defiantly. Now that is something that is not shown in the film. *Frost/Nixon* is the most interesting one for me to judge in terms of biography and the responsibility of the creative writing, because in the first half of *Frost/Nixon* I basically paint a portrait of Frost as an idiot, like a sort of lightweight; this is not really a truthful portrait of Frost. Frost was somebody who could not resist following every single avenue in a career, and so, somebody who should have made a business of being serious, who was also doing game shows, and comedy shows, and sketch shows. That's not to say he wasn't also serious. I omitted the serious part. So that when a game show host, or a talk show host, or an entertainment guy was trying to get Richard Nixon, it felt more beyond his reach. And Frost was furious, he hated me. No, he really hated me, because I insulted him for the first hour of the play and of the film. And I kept saying to him, if I paint you how you want to be painted, everyone will leave the cinema, they just won't be interested. And I am making this film because I think it says interesting things about the process of cutting up an interview. And in order to do that I need to get an audience interested, and they are going to be interested in the David and Goliath side of this. It's like *Rocky*. And so I painted Richard Nixon out to be more remote of everything, I exaggerated who they were in a way I had never done with *The Queen*. I exaggerated these two people and then when Frost defeated Nixon, I gave him a victory I don't necessarily believe in. Because I felt by this point I had mortgaged myself so far, because I had gone so far away from some of the intelligence Frost actually had that I needed to give him a victory in order to create a composite picture of who Frost is and to be honest and truthful about who Frost is. So I had to give him the victory, which was slightly irresponsible because Richard Nixon never really gave him that victory. And when we screened the film in Washington, all these other

Watergate bounty hunters, Woodward and Bernstein and all these guys who made their lives killing Richard Nixon, they came and they were furious. They said, he never laid a finger on, and I said, well, he kind of did. Look at the footage. And they said, yeah, well if you look at the footage and you stop it, that's fine, he won, but if you let the footage carry on, he didn't. Richard Nixon bounced back up again. And I wrestled with this really a lot. And I sort of let it go, until David Frost died. The Frost-Nixon interviews, the reason why I was so excited about that was because no one had remembered them. I dug them up. They were a financial disaster for David Frost, they never really achieved what *All the President's Men*, the book written by Carl Bernstein, achieved. But when David Frost died, all the obituaries said this was the man that killed Richard Nixon. The film *totally* defined Frost's legacy. Completely. You go to Wikipedia, if you go on to Frost, if you're having a look at any of Frost's obituaries, David Frost has entirely become remembered as a very successful entertainer, etc., etc. – his greatest achievement was: taking Richard Nixon down. And I'm like, what have I done?! That's when I get the cold chill of responsibility, of biographical film-making, of biographical story-telling, because what happens is, in the way modern media work, say, a journalist who does a profile on David Frost will go on the computer in his or her newspaper, get all the cuttings done on David Frost, and what happens is, instead of reading through the Internet and all these newspaper outlets, instead of a wider discourse being available, it's reductive. The Internet reduces. And what happens is, you go online, and you diddle-diddle-di-da and zip-zip-zip-whoop and a little blob of truth comes out: and now David Frost is the killer of Richard Nixon. David Frost is a two-sentence sound bite which every single journalist lazily reproduces, and I'm sure I would if I were a journalist. So, that becomes this google-ised, reductive conspiracy with truth and accuracy that biographical writing has to push through and question and interrogate. And that's why I'm uncomfortable about *Frost/Nixon*. I keep waiting ... to be arrested. By the biography police.

JLN: Is there a special kind of pressure involved in writing about people who are still alive? I am also thinking of Niki Lauda's case. Does this cause you anxieties?

PM: No, we've really become very, very close, and I consider him a friend. That is the best example. I mean, with the queen and Tony Blair, people like this, there is no come-back. They very wisely agreed in an audience agreement to have no point of view about the film. I know that they have both seen it, but they make no comment in public, which is great. If you have a look at Tony Blair's biography – it's called *A Journey* – if you look

at his description of what it is to see the queen, it almost reads like a line-for-line transcript of the scene that I wrote. It is complete lunacy. His memory has become infected by seeing the film. I was like, you've *got* to be kidding, because he's even got the jokes in that we wrote, and, as I've told you, I had no idea what they said to one another. I just made it up. And now he's saying that's what it was. It's too weird. You ask him where he does his research.

JLN: I saw *Rush* in London, last autumn, and it was interesting for me, as an Austrian, to see the film in London, to think about the film from a national point of view, because I felt you had not really given preference to any of the two characters. They have each been portrayed as likeable or dislikeable. But, nevertheless, I felt drawn to Niki Lauda, and I felt that he was the more sincere person, and I was wondering whether there was any intent in weighing the portrait towards either side.

PM: Well, I think there are several reasons for that. The first is that James Hunt is dead, and I couldn't spend the time with James that I could with Niki. I think I had thirty dinners with Niki. That's as truthful as it gets. And in places as accurate as it gets. I also think Niki's story is a more complicated part, and obviously your sympathies are going to go to someone whose face gets burned off.

And Niki decided to completely trust me, very early on. I just said to him, "Look, I'd love to write about you, but here are my conditions. And, I'll be really cool if you say I can't do that." And I said, "I get to ask all the questions, you get to see nothing. I give you nothing. If I show you scenes, it will only be because I want to, but even if you tell me that you object to them, I want to feel free to write what I want to write. You *have* to think of this as a portrait, where I'm painting something and you might not like the portrait." And he said, okay, and so we did it. He was really truthful about it ... and when I had written it we were about to start filming, and there are very difficult scenes in which Niki is very objectionable. And I said to him, "it's gonna be quite tough, Niki, not just emotionally; you're gonna have to go through the accident, and experience all that. But, I have not painted a picture of you that you would have painted of yourself." He said, OK, and so then we shot it, and he had found the whole experience very emotional and very difficult. But he came up to me afterwards, after the film had been out for several months, and said, "I just don't understand it," he said, "let's be honest, you painted me out to be a total asshole." And he said, "in the film, I am shitty, mean-spirited, ungenerous, everybody dislikes me. And everywhere I go round the world now, people come and hug me and tell me they love me." He said he's been hated his whole life until

this film came out. We haven't done anything in the film to make Niki an attractive person, I don't think. I think we've been pretty solid all the way through the film saying: "He's an asshole." And yeah, I grew to like him so much, you know, the honesty, integrity and the courage.

WH: You have a longstanding connection with Michael Sheen. When you write a new bio-pic, as it were, after the first and the second with Michael Sheen ... does this become typecasting?

PM: No, no, that was just freaky. I don't know quite what happened, it just happened that way. We did *The Deal* and then *The Queen*. He's playing the same part. Having played *The Deal* and *The Queen*, he had to play *The Special Relationship*. And then, I mean, he really does look exactly like Brian Clough [in *The Damned United*⁸], so that was not a coincidence. And he looks pretty much like David Frost, too. We haven't worked together now for a few years, and I would always work with him again, but I'm not actively looking for something for Michael.

Student 1: You were talking about the impact that your films have on cultural memory, and I was wondering, in this regard, how much do you believe that movies can or actually should participate in political discourse?

PM: Of course, all artists want to express themselves in whichever medium they happen to work in. Film is *bad* as a rapid-response medium, because it's just so cumbersome, and it takes forever to make a film. Television is far better, theatre is the best. You can get a play going on about something that's almost unfolding in front of you. And frequently that happens. It doesn't often have the same international resonance. In answer to your question, all artists have a right to express whatever they want to, at whatever time they wish, but I wouldn't choose film. I have a personal ten-year rule. As long as it happened ten years ago, I feel that I can look back on it, and then maybe you can use it in a different way, as a metaphor. It has the possibility of metaphorical resonance. If you're responding to something immediately it doesn't, it's instinctively journalistic. I would choose film as a medium where it has the opportunity to work on a number of levels, with the benefit of historical hindsight. So I would say film is a terrible medium to respond rapidly. You have a look at the George Bush movie that was made ... I didn't think it really worked, and it was too soon. The only exception I could think of is *The Social Network*, which I thought was brilliant. And that was rapid response, but that was pretty much a decade. It was almost ten years old.

JLN: To pick up on this question, you said that you effectively helped change public attitude towards Gordon Brown. Is that then merely a side-effect, or is that part of your remit?

PM: That's out of control, that's absolutely out of your control. You do what you can, yeah. I've written other things which didn't have the pick-up. So, there was significant pick-up on the David Frost thing. In my opinion it was lazy pick-up, and in no way am I either happy, or do I take satisfaction from the reductive nature of it. With Gordon Brown I felt really comfortable. What our film said about Gordon Brown was nothing that a good investigative journalist wouldn't have found out, or indeed a biographer. There is no part of my interpretation of Gordon Brown that is controversial or prone to misunderstanding.

Student 2: My question concerns literary adaptations and transformations. I was thinking about *360*, the movie, and I wonder if you could say something about veracity and truthful representation, if you feel you have more freedom to experiment with a work of fiction than with the life-story of a real person.

PM: You mean, are you freer with fiction than you are adapting fact? No, no. Well, we know that certain things happened. I'll take *The Queen*, for example, it's a very straightforward story. You make the choice: let's do the story of what happened after Diana's death. The producer actually asked me to write a story about who killed Diana. And that's what I came up with. He was like, oh no, this is really boring, it's got Tony Blair in it. But somehow that was the only thing that I wanted to write. Once you've made the decision that the days *after* Diana's death were more interesting than the ones leading *up* to Diana's death, then actually once you've made the decision that it goes to the point where the queen is reduced to where she makes an apology, it's really simple. You've basically got five days, what happened each day, and you can research. If you have that framework, arguably it is a lot easier than if you have the freedom of fiction. But many, many times I struggled existentially with the fact that things just don't do what you want them to do. Why did they do that, that doesn't suit the character at all? And that's because human beings are endlessly complex and contradictory. Here's a good example: Niki Lauda. If you're doing a story about the rivalry between James Hunt and Niki Lauda, it builds to the race in Fuji in 1976. So, in a Hollywood movie, the two of them will be going nose to nose, toe to toe, until the final lap, right? Well, Niki pulls out after lap one! Which leaves James Hunt on his own, in the car, for 63 laps. I said to Niki, this is

a catastrophe! And Ron Howard was like, oh my God, what are we gonna do about that race?! And it took us months to construct that final race in a way that it was suspenseful, even though we all know what happened, Niki's not in the race. Niki's had a shower. He's changed, he's sitting in the helicopter. And we're still trying to ..., how do you make that? And that last ten minutes of *Rush* took 80 percent of the time. I wrote a hundred versions of that scene.

Student 3: The meetings between Tony Blair and the Queen, you had to make them up because they are completely confidential. But scenes like the press conference in *Rush*, and even more so the radio interview in *Longford* all happened in front of the public, how true are they to the actual conversation?

PM: Well, I'm glad you mentioned *Longford*,⁹ I really love that film. Actually, funnily enough, the radio interview was not a sourced interview, I made that up. I mean it's not a controversial interview. It's basically a guy saying to him, who are you, and then I can write who he is. With *Rush*, for example, the journalist saying what he said about Niki and his wife, do you think she will leave you because of the way you look now, this, he said that. I then made up that James Hunt punched him, but James Hunt punching him was a way of me dramatising what was truthful. Not the punch, okay, that didn't happen, but I think what you left that scene with was a sense of James's respect and affection for Niki which he was unable to articulate, because, ultimately, he was his biggest rival. And that *was* truthful, that is how James Hunt felt about Niki. He wanted to kill him, but he also ... If he had to choose one person with whom to spend an evening, it would have been Niki, that was the person he most respected. And ultimately rivalry is an expression of love. You're not a rival with someone you disrespect. And so I felt comfortable about the punch, even though it's completely untrue.

Student 4: Could you say something about how the general public nowadays perceive the biographical subjects of your plays or films, why they prefer these heroes to be portrayed, in your terms, as very likeable monsters?

PM: Well, listen, I'm not really a republican, I'm not really a monarchist. I don't have a strong feeling about our royal family. But there is no doubt that with the film *The Queen* ... I think two things happened. In those days after Diana's death, she really made a complete tit of herself. And it showed an organisation completely out of sync with the mood of the

country and so forth. And that of course led people to ask the question, why do we need these people? These people are idiots. And so there was an immediate aftermath of Diana's death. There was a lot of anti-monarchist writing, a lot from serious people. You can still get it online, it's amazing. A lot of republican essays were written. And it felt very strange that a man like Tony Blair, who had been elected on a modernising ticket, that almost his first action was an action of implicit conservatism. If I were to give you the screenplay – same about the Niki Lauda thing – if I were to give you the screenplay for *The Queen* ... We were not criticised, or attacked, but people did say, "You do realise, you've written this love letter to the queen?" And I said, "I challenge you to read the screenplay ... you won't find any evidence for that in the screenplay". She was closed, uncommunicative, unhelpful, patronising, snobby, emotionally distant. She wasn't nice to anybody in this film. Not nice as a mother, and yet people just loved her after this movie. Stephen Frears, more than me, is a passionate republican; he lies awake at night thinking that our film in some way started this ridiculous, uncritical thing. The monarchy has never been as popular in the last one hundred years as it is now. It is. There is absolutely no serious republican or anti-monarchist writing in Britain at all. Do I feel comfortable about the fact? No, I hate it, I get embarrassed, and I get angry when people say your film ... everyone loves them now. I, personally, don't think it's the fault of the film. There's no question the film played a part in it. But I also think she's reached an age, where actually, to beat up an old lady is undignified. I think that no sooner will she die than you'll see quite sharp anti-monarchist sentiments in Britain again.

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NOTES

- 1 Supported by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF): T 589–G23. The programme leaflet can be accessed via <http://anglistik.univie.ac.at/home/staff-members/lajta-novak-julia/>.
- 2 Belén Vidal, "Introduction: The Biopic and its Critical Contexts," *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, ed. Tom Brown and Belén Vidal (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 1–32 (1–2).
- 3 Hattenstone, Simon. "Inside the Minds of the Mighty." *The Guardian* 13 Dec 2008. 26 Mar 2015. <<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2008/dec/13/peter-morgan-scriptwriter-frost-nixon>>.
- 4 *Frost/Nixon*. Dir. Ron Howard. Universal Pictures, 2008; *The Other Boleyn Girl*. Dir. Justin Chadwick. BBC Films, 2008; *The Deal*. Dir. Stephen Frears. Granada Television, 2003; *The Queen*. Dir. Stephen Frears. Granada Productions, 2006; *The Special Relationship*. Dir. Richard Loncraine. Rainmark Films, 2010; *Rush*. Dir. Ron Howard. Cross Creek Pictures, 2013.
- 5 Vidal, "Introduction," p. 10.
- 6 Belén Vidal, "Morgan/Sheen: The Compressed Frame of Impersonation," *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, ed. Tom Brown and Belén Vidal (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 140–158 (144).
- 7 The authors would like to express their gratitude to Ms Michaela Schober for helping with the transcription.
- 8 *The Damned United*. Dir. Tom Hooper. BBC Films, 2009.
- 9 *Longford*. Dir. Tom Hooper. Granada Productions, 2006.